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Navajo President Says Navajo Head Start is Improving

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly welcomed the opening of a new school year at Navajo Nation Head Start.

“We are making progress to make our Head Start Program better than it has been in the past. We are making bold changes and want to make sure our Head Start program complies with all the federal Head Start standards,” President Shelly said.

Navajo Head Start, a \$27 million program, has been trying to stabilize throughout the year after nearly being terminated by Federal Head Start in fall of 2011 and, most recently, the program achieved a feat that has hampered Head Start for years. During this next school year the program will begin its first year of rebuilding in order to improve services.

“This has to be done because it is one of the terms that the Navajo Nation agreed to with the Federal Office of Head Start in our government to government consultations to keep the program running,” said Dawn Yazzie, presidential staff assistant assigned to Head Start.

Yazzie has been working closely with Navajo Head Start since last summer, and now has some pieces in place that are going to be the pillars for the program to continue to rebuild.

For the first time in recent history, a licensed superintendent heads Navajo Head Start.

Sharon Singer, who has 25 years of teaching and administrative experience in working with rural and urban schools, was hired on at Navajo Head Start in the middle of August.

“Early Childhood is vital to the education system, my vision is to provide quality education and services to the students and families of the Navajo Nation,” says Singer. Transformative leadership that encompasses transparency and accountability is priority for Singer.

“I will be visiting your centers,” Singer said to Head Start employees before the school year started.

Navajo Head Start has enrolled more than 2,100 students for the upcoming year, which is about two thirds of what enrollment was before the 2006 shutdown.

Various issues from filling vacant positions to bringing structures into compliance have hindered the program’s enrollment potential.

“One of our biggest challenges is getting enrollment numbers back to where they used to be due to the programs instability and lack of updated facilities and difficulty in finding credentialed teachers,” Yazzie said.

When Head Start was suspended in 2006, about 3,600 students were enrolled in centers and home base programs throughout the Navajo Nation.

However, another factor plagued the Navajo Head Start. The federal government threatened to cut Navajo Head Start’s funding in half from \$27 million a year to just below \$15 million a year. Then came news of the program being possibly terminated due to non-compliance in correcting issues.

“I had to use my political connections to meet with high ranking federal officials to keep the program afloat,” President Shelly said.

President Shelly met with U.S. Senators and Representatives and told them that Head Start didn’t consult with the Navajo Nation on a government-to-government basis. This consultation is required considering that the Navajo Nation has unique differences from other large programs across the United States.

“The Navajo Nation has very little infrastructure and very minimal health resources,” said President Shelly. All of these issues affect the Navajo Head Start program.

The Office of Head Start Director Yvette Sanchez-Fuentes conducted a sight visit in December and agreed to allow the Navajo Nation three to five years to revamp Head Start in order to meet the more than 2,800 regulations.

“We have come a long ways since November of last year, but we aren’t out of the woods yet. We still have a lot of work to do to make this program successful. I hope everyone gets on board for the changes we must make to keep this program on the Navajo Nation,” President Shelly added.

The Head Start program received a letter in mid-August from the Office of Head Start confirming that they will receive \$26.8 million for fiscal year 2013 to run the program.

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